

Just Say Aah

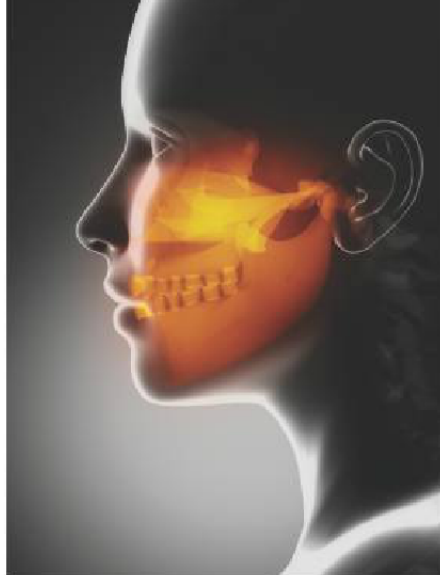
Yoga for Jaw Tension

BY CATOR SHACHOY

Quick—what's happening inside your mouth? Right now, what's your tongue doing? Is it resting in the lower palate? Is it pushing against the roof of your mouth, or against the back of your teeth? Is it held somewhere in between all of the above, tense, and perhaps a bit vigilant? What about your teeth—what are they doing? Are your upper and lower teeth touching, even if there is no food in your mouth? And your throat—how does it feel? Is it hard or soft? Tight or open? The energetics of the mandible include survival and nurturance—eating, drinking, and suckling. Our sensuality and sexuality are expressed through the jaw with the enjoyment of food, kissing, and intimacy. Our speech, expression, and connection with others come through our mouth, as does our anger, isolation, and discontent (have you pouted recently?). What we say and don't say is bound up in a sophisticated, complex web of social conditioning, needs, wants, and desires.

Jaw tension affects about 20% of Americans, and twice as many women as men. It's most common in 20- to 40-year-olds, but can begin earlier and last until late in life. Symptoms of jaw tension—also called TMJ, or TMD for temporomandibular joint dysfunction—include pain when biting or chewing, clicking or popping in the jaw, and jaw muscles that are painful or sore to the touch. For many, chronic jaw tension includes the habit of grinding the teeth while sleeping, which can mean waking up with pain in the face, a tight or sore neck and shoulders, and sometimes headaches, including migraines.

Being unable to fully open your mouth or bite into hard foods can be a part of jaw tension. Broken crowns, worn-down teeth, root canals, sinus infections, and ringing in the ears can also go along with TMJ/TMD. Other associated issues include tight hips, groin muscles, and psoas muscles; digestive disorders; and for women, menstrual disorders.



What causes jaw tension?

The sources of tension on the TMJs can be many and varied, including car accidents, whiplash, blows to the head or neck, other physical trauma, and braces or dental work. Emotional trauma can also be a factor. When we feel threatened, the fight-or-flight response is activated, and our primal, animal nature can lead to a clenched jaw as a part of a defensive response. Early childhood trauma or other difficulties we face in life may be repressed and survived by "gritting one's teeth and bearing it."

TMD can be caused by birth. If you have seen a newborn baby, you may have remarked on the shape of its head. The birthing process is highly compressive, with intense torsional pressures on the skull. An infant's skull has more membrane than bone, and thus is highly pliable. It will normally self-correct within three days of birth. However, most babies retain some imbalance. It's part of the perfect imperfection of being alive—no two bodies are alike, and none are in complete balance. Unresolved tensions can be compounded by other factors, resulting in chronic jaw tension as we mature.

How can we release the tension?

So how can we help ourselves to relieve a bound-up jaw? Facial massage to ease tight jaw muscles can help. Yoga and relaxation techniques bring relief. When doing yoga, try opening your mouth gently in every pose to help build awareness to the habit of clenching. Pay special attention to how your jaw feels when opening the hips (wide leg poses, Pigeon pose), and stretching the shoulders (Downward Dog pose). Let your head and neck relax to receive passive traction in Downward Dog.

A simple approach to relieving jaw tension that can be practiced any time is to begin to pay attention to your jaw throughout the day, noticing what causes stress and what brings relief. Go back to the first paragraph. What is your tongue doing right now? The tongue is the guardian of the mouth. As with most guards, it will tend to have some tension. It can be a big help to start to notice what it is doing and why it is doing it. (Ever notice how the tongue moves the food around in there while you're eating? It is making sure everything gets properly processed in this first stage of digestion.) We can also notice when the tongue has unnecessary tension, which can be a sign of jaw tension, and an early signal to start to consciously relax.

Now your teeth—the upper and lower teeth should never touch unless they are chewing food. Whenever you find your teeth are touching, simply release the lower jaw down and away, even if that means your mouth hangs open a bit. Really. This is a simple way to release the habit of clenching.

Your throat will tend to tighten when you even *think* of saying something. Throat tension is another hallmark of jaw tension building and can be used as a form of biofeedback to take care of oneself and to find ways to relax.

Here are three questions to keep in mind throughout your day:

How does my jaw feel right now?

Tight or loose, hard or soft? Cultivating awareness can help to unravel tension before it becomes painful.

Where in my body am I breathing?

Belly breathing can unlock a tight jaw whereas chest breathing tends to contribute to more tension in shoulders, neck, and jaw.

What emotion am I experiencing right now?

The habit of clenching the jaw is not isolated from our overall sense of well-being. We are more prone to clench when we feel in some way threatened or vulnerable. By holding ourselves with compassion and inviting awareness of subtle emotions, we can begin to cultivate an awareness of tensions as they arise. This is a way of gently taking care of ourselves and inviting tensions to release before they get out of control. Ultimately, the result will be greater ease and relaxation in our lives, as well as a loose and happy jaw. 🐾

Cator Shachoy is a craniosacral practitioner, yoga instructor, and mindfulness teacher in private practice in SF. Her workshops include Yoga for Jaw Tension. CatorShachoy.com